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By David Rogers, Politico

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Democratic Rep. John Murtha — just back from a fact-finding trip to Afghanistan — said Monday that he never got a clear definition of what constitutes an “achievable victory” for the United States and fears that American commanders are assuming more time for the war effort than voters at home will allow.

“I am still very nervous about this whole thing,” Murtha told POLITICO. “If you had 10 years, it might work; if you had five, you could make a difference. But you don’t have that long.”

A top Democrat on military matters, the Pennsylvania lawmaker captures the skepticism facing the White House as President Barack Obama prepares to commit up to 35,000 more troops to the war effort. Obama has chosen a military forum, West Point, for his nationally televised speech Tuesday night, but Congress is the real test and a better reflection of the unease among everyday Americans.

Murtha, who chairs the defense appropriations panel in the House, is among the senior lawmakers slated to meet with the president at the White House on Tuesday. A Marine veteran of the Vietnam War and close ally of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.), the Pennsylvanian has worked closely with retired Marine Gen. James Jones, Obama’s national security adviser, who also served in Vietnam.

But it will be next to impossible for Obama to build broad support among Democrats in the House without bringing Murtha along.

“What’s the meaning of victory? I can’t remember a clear answer,” the chairman said of his briefings by military commanders and State Department officials in Afghanistan. And a later stop in Kuwait, where his delegation met with generals managing the withdrawal from Iraq, underscored the time pressures and costs facing Obama.

Delays in Iraq’s elections are already threatening to slow the pace of the withdrawal there, Murtha said, while in Afghanistan, the new U.S. commander charged with training the Afghan security forces — Army Lt. Gen. William Caldwell — estimated he had arrived to find only about half the resources needed for his job.

Obama, as a central part of his strategy, will try to correct this by adding thousands of additional trainers.

The missed opportunities to begin more training in Afghanistan earlier are, in part, a legacy of the Bush administration’s almost single-minded focus on Iraq’s needs. Only \$3.5 billion in funding was provided for Afghan security forces from fiscal 2004 through 2006 — about a quarter of what was provided for Iraqi security forces in the same period.

Critics warn that this administration must be more honest about its own training goals, and Obama is paying a price now for mistakes made last spring when he raised troop levels to 68,000 without a better assessment of the strategy he needed.

“He allowed himself to be rushed into announcing what he said was a strategy but was actually little more than a broad set of concepts,” writes Anthony Cordesman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies. “The months of effort within the U.S. national security community that have followed have shown the president spoke before there was any meaningful reassessment of the threat.”

Cordesman has been a voice for “strategic patience,” predicting that, even in the best case, “it is unlikely that the insurgency and terrorist threat can be entirely defeated in Afghanistan and Pakistan within the next decade.”

“People always look for a punch line in any very complex situation, and inevitably they are wrong,” he told POLITICO. But he — like the more impatient Murtha — also says Obama must better define what victory means for his new strategy.

Others agree. "What is victory? It's a good question," said House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Howard Berman (D-Calif.). "I'm not as prone to jumping into wars as I used to be. He spent two months deciding," Berman said of Obama. "I think I can spend a few weeks."

The same weeks coincide with the health care debate in the Senate and the growing pressure in the House for more action to counter unemployment. New jobless numbers are due Friday, and Obama himself will pivot from West Point to a meeting on the economy at the White House later this week.

A new Democracy Corps poll released Monday warns of eroding support for Obama's economic message in 60 competitive House districts. "The country is not ready to listen to a narrative about how Democrats have brought the economy back from the brink and averted an even worse disaster, as articulated by the president in his joint session address to Congress earlier this year," reads the accompanying analysis.

Ironically enough, one of the commanders who impressed Murtha most was British Maj. Gen. Nick Carter in Helmand Province, who didn't hesitate to say that real progress had to be shown by next May to keep political support alive at home.

"All these generals understand it can't be won militarily. The more people you kill, the more enemies you make," Murtha said. He credited the U.S. commander, Army Gen. Stanley McChrystal, with firmly changing the direction: "He's trying to switch from killing people to winning their hearts and minds. It's almost as simple as that."

"He laid it out. He gave the best explanation he could of how it would work if you have the time, but I don't think he has the time," Murtha continued.

"I asked how much time he needed. He said he needs three years. I think he said at least three years. I said, 'You don't have three years.'"